GOD'S PSEUDONYM
Genesis 28, 10-16
Matthew 11:2-11

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God, I have concluded, must have a great sense of humor. He must, I think, laugh at the presumptuousness and pomposity of his children when they act as if they know more than they do, or when they take hold of something that has happened in their own history - pull it out of context, adorn it with myths, rituals and customs, and end up losing sight of what it was that made that event so significant in the first place.

Surely God laughs at what has happened over the years to the birth of his Son. For no event in history has become quite so institutionalized as the improbable birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem of Judea. As that event has been remembered and celebrated across the centuries it has acquired a train load of freight in the form of traditions; traditions that increase in sentimentality every time they are repeated: traditions that become more predictable with each succeeding repetition: traditions - the reciting of which has become a tradition itself with very little relationship to the birth of God's only son.

Now I hasten to confess that when it comes to Christmas traditions I probably have no peer. Things must be in the right place: "the stockings are hung with a great deal of care" in our household: I admit to a deep love for the customs that have come to have meaning to my own family.

And yet I am accutely aware that what we have done with Christmas - and the reason for the laughter of God at Christmas - is institutionalize it. We have given Christmas life of its own - apart from the event it ostensibly celebrates. And when we do include the birth of the baby as one of the customs of Christmas we sand off the sharp edges of particularity so that it can mean whatever we want it to mean. So, the birth of Jesus gets all mixed up with Santa Claus, gift exchanges, tinsel and lights: "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!" is played back-to-back with "Jingle Bell Rock" and no one seems to know the difference - because in fact, there is no difference. It is all one package: the predictable, sentimental, customary yuletide blast.

Objectively - and we do have difficulty being objective about traditions, don't we? -the birth of Jesus, the Christmas event, was rather untraditional. It was unique, unlikely, unexpected, improbable, contrary to popular hope and, for the most part, unnoticed.

and we do have difficulty thinking theologically when
Theologically -/ we are so busy exercising our traditions - the Christmas event serves notice that God cannot be domesticated, locked in, made to conform to the formal and predictable patterns of human expectation. Theologically, the Christmas event means that we live on a planet that has been invaded by the divine, and it serves notice that if we are interested in perceiving the divine at work in our midst we'd better be looking in some rather unlikely, untraditional and unpredictable places - such as a cattle stall - or a cross on the town garbage heap.

Institutional religion has notoriously taken that measure of truth around which it was organized and ritualized it. Religion notoriously takes that which it perceives as "Holy" - meaning "other" - and so decorates it with customes that it is no longer holy at all - just traditional. And yet, at the heart of the matter, the religion of the Bible begins with a God who continually shows himself to be unpredictable: a God who doesn't seem to care what men call him, preferring to use pseudonyms. That's a major Biblical theme which comes sharply into focus as we think about the Christmas event. But it begins long before, on the very edge of recorded history.

The Old Testament Lesson this morning, for instance, tells the story of Jacob on his way from Beersheba to Haran. When night came he stopped, made camp, put a stone under his head and went to sleep. It was a journey, not a spiritual pilgrimage. During the night Jacob had a dream involving angels climbing up and down a ladder which extended from earth to heaven. For our purposes this morning the content of that dream is not as important at Jacob's reaction when he awoke and thought about what had happened. He said two very important things: "The Lord is in this place" and "I did not know it". That is to say, God - as men were just beginning to perceive who he was - prove himself to be quite unconfined by the expectations of men, and quite free to act when and where and how he willed to act.

The theme turns up again in the 19th chapter of First Kings as Elijah is escaping into the wilderness from a queen by the name of Jezebel. Elijah is pursued, however, not by Jezebel but by God who orders him to come up onto the mountain for a face to face accounting. The text reads as follows:

"And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent

> the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice".

The significance of that passage is that it recounts all the ways which men in Elijah's time expected God to reveal himself. Men looked for the divine in the terrible, mysterious cataclysms of nature. And here is the Old Testament asserting that God came, not in the ways that were traditional; not in the normal, expected manner - but strangely, differently, unpredictably. God, the Old Testament insists, assumes "pseudonyms", strange names. It is a theme that carries over into the New Testament.

In our lesson this morning John the Baptist is in prison: this is the same John that had announced God's mighty act of redemption and had been the first to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. But now, John was backing off, and sending messages to Jesus asking whether or not he were the one - or whether they should be looking for another. That is to say, John wasn't perceiving the revelation of God in the things Jesus was doing. Paul Scherer writes: "John had read in the prophets that the Messiah would come with a fan in his hand, to send the chaff scurrying from the threshing floor, pitchfork and shovel, toward the blazing fire. But he dame so gently, doing such compassionate, obscure things.... It wasn't right." (The Word God Sent, P.197)

For the Christian Jesus is the supreme pseudonym of God. And there could not have been a more improbable or less traditional life than his own. The men of his age thought they know all there was to know about God. They had God pretty well defined in terms of 600 odd "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots". They had read the prophets and the signs of their own time and hope for the coming of the Messiah was running high. They knew what he would look like and what he would do when he came. He would restore their kingdom by leading a successful revolt against the Romans; of if they happened to be enjoying the Roman occupation he would lead a restoration and purification of the Temple Religion. The fact was that Jesus met no one's expectations: he didn't measure up to anyone's messianic formula. When he ate in the ome of a tax collector he offended the purists

the establishment: when he walked away from a cheering group of zealots who wanted to make him King and start the revolution he offended them. Even his disciples had to learn to discard their own expectations - and to follow a Lord who was most untraditional and most unpredictable.

And the worst happened at the end. Who would think of a Messiah getting arrested? Who could imagine God's son submitting to the humiliation of a trial and a public beating? Who would look for God hanging on a cross, executed as a common criminal? Jesus upset every current notion of God - every expectation of the Messiah. And because they were so locked into their traditions and customs and rituals and religion the vast and overwhelming majority of them missed it all, and worse, participated in his crucifixion.

Well, where are we today? How are we doing with our traditions and with a God who served notice time and time again - especially in Bethlehem - that he's really not too interested in our traditions but will be among us in strange and pseudonymous ways?

The literature of our day is heavy with the suggestion that God isn't here anymore - if he is at all. The serious theology of the day talks about the "hiddeness of God" or the "eclipse of God" or, finally, the "Death of God." The idea seems to be that if there is a God at all he has temporarily retired to some remote corner of the universe to let his creation destroy itself. Even "Jesus Christ Superstar", in many respects a remarkable affirmation of the Gospel, leaves the question of God's revelation in Jesus Christ - quite up in the air; or-more accurately - hanging on a cross. And if we take at all seriously the contention that God's ultimate act came about in an obscure stable in an obscure village in an obscure corner of the earth, it ought at least to occur to us that our problem is one of looking in the wrong places. Or to say it another way, it ought to occur to us that the very traditions of religion that observe God's past activity may be the barrier to perceiving God's present activity. Our sentimental fawning over the manger, that is, just may be the reason why we don't sense the ways God keeps incarnating himself in the immediate world of 1972.

In an excellent book, "Bread and Wine" Ignazio Silone, describes a conversation between an Italian revolutionary in the 30's and an old priest. The priest, Don Benedetto, says:

"In times of conspiratorial and secret struggle, the Lord is obliged to hide himself and assume pseudonyms. Besides, and you know it, He does not attach very much importance to His name... Might not the ideal of social justice be one of the pseudonyms the Lord is using to free Himself from the control of the Churches and the banks?"

When we understand that the "cause of social justice" in Italy in the 1930's was Marxism, the sentiment becomes profoundly disturbing. Can it be seriously suggested that God acts through Communists? The prophet Isaiah made a similar suggestion: he suggested that Assyria - a pagan, enemy nation, would be the instrucment of God's will: that the righteousness of God could be perceived in the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Assynains. That kind of suggestion has never been very popular - because it flies in the face of the comfortable theology and religious traditions of people. But the God of the Bible uses pseudonyms - names other than people are accustomed to using. Jesus - for instance: the baby of Bethlehem.

If Jesus Christ was the revelation of God - if Jesus is the supreme pseudonym of God for us - then his life becomes the clue as we look for God's activity in our world. Robert McAfee Brown puts it this way:

"Since he was an outcast, we must not be surprised to find contemporary reflections of his presence among the outcast. Since he was a servant, we must look for signs of his presence today among those who serve...Since he became man, we must acknowledge that in every man there is one who can be served in his name, just as he served all men in his Father's name. Since he lived very much in the world, we will look for him not only in holy places or by means of holy words, but we will look for him also in the common ordinary things of life for which he gave himself: bread (whether broken around a kitchen table or at an altar), carpentry, men in need, even tax collectors."

In my life and yours that means that God comes and acts in ways we must be very careful to discern. He uses pseudonyms in our lives: he comes to us - in each other: he acts through us when we love and serve each other: he comes to us in the surprises of love and unexpected affected we are given to experience at Christmas. He is just as unpredictable in ur lives - as he has always been in history.

And it all begins in this season as we celebrate this most improbable birth. If it had happened today, Brown suggests, it would probably sound like this: the child would be born of poor parents in a remote South African tribe. He would grow up as a member of an oppressed minority. He would never travel more than fifty miles from his village and spend most of his time following his father's trade as a primitive farmer. He would gather a few followers, be arrested as a trouble maker and after a short time in prison and a phony trial be shot as an enemy of the people.

That's how improbable the birth of Jesus Christ was. That's how unpredictable and untraditional our God is. That is how incredible the message of Christmas can be: God coming among men in the infant son of lower class Jews soon-to-be-refugees, in a cowstall.

So - with one week remaining let us embrace our lovely Christmas traditions - but this time with care. May they speak to us of a God who is not very predictable: may they express for us a love that is real and healing and creating: may they open us to the ways the love which came down at Christmas keeps coming down into the world and into our lives: may they point us backward to that unlikely Bethlehem tableau, but also outward to a world and a life in which God continues to reconcile and heal and love.

And when on Christmas Eve we sing-

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given" - may we know that it was given once - and is given today, tomorrow and everyday. AMEN

Father, fill our traditions with yourspirit. Open us to the goodness of the birth: and help us to see that goodness expressed in our world, our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN